



Jake Fleagle

The FLEAGLE GANG



Ralph Fleagle

During the latter 1920's and 1930's, there were many bank robbers, some who became quite notorious. Two such bank robbers were in the Fleagle family. Their last bank robbery turned into a deadly tragedy for many.

Accounts describe Jake as the leader and most claim him as the older brother; however, Jake was actually ten years younger than Ralph, who was the eldest.

What sets this case apart from others of those days is that this was the first time an arrest had been made with a fingerprint by the FBI.

Fingerprint Undoes The Fleagle Gang

Garden City Gang Terrorizes the Midwest by Mary Hooper

Among the desperadoes who terrorized the Great Plains during the Roaring '20s were a quartet of bank robbers and killers from Garden City known as the Fleagle Gang.

The gang of brothers Ralph and Jake Fleagle, Howard "Heavy" Royston and George Abshire robbed banks in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and California for at least ten years, absconding with as much as \$1 million, some of which is said to remain buried in Kansas and California to this day.

Their spectacular end involved a bank heist in Colorado, four killings, a hideout in the Ozarks, a single, tell-tale fingerprint, and an ex-moll who turned rat.

Like Bonnie and Clyde, Baby-Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelly, John Dillinger, and the Ma Barker Gang, the Fleagles were a made-for-the-tabloids sensation. Unlike the foregoing, however, the Fleagle Gang faded into obscurity, their exploits today known mainly to fans of American gangster lore.

Maybe it's their comical name. Fleagle doesn't sound tough like Dillinger or Barker. In fact, Al Capp, creator of the beloved Li'l Abner comic strip, was inspired by the Fleagles to create a zoot-suited ne'er-do-well called Evil Eye Fleegle whose specialty was a frightening stare known as the whammy or the double whammy. In New York City in the '30s, a bunch of young fellows liked to hang out at the offices of E.C. Comics. They were dubbed the Fleagle Gang, but they didn't turn out to be lawbreakers. They became cartoonists for Mad Magazine. All of which might have annoyed Ralph and Jake, for there was nothing comical about them. They were cunning. They were daring. And they were violent.

The Fleagle family moved from Iowa to western Kansas in the 1880s. Ralph was born in 1880, Jake in 1890. There were two other boys in the family, Walter and Fred, who managed to stay out of trouble, more or less. But Jake and Ralph seemed cut out for a life of crime. As a young man, Jake made his way to San Francisco, where he became a card shark. He and Ralph roamed around a lot, committing crimes, mostly robberies. Jake's first arrest was in Oklahoma. He served a year in the state penitentiary in McAlester for robbery.

At some point, he and Ralph decided to rob banks. They made the family homestead in Garden City their headquarters, until they established their own ranch-hideout, and lavished much of their loot on their family.

"Neighbors began to notice that Ralph and Jake were constantly coming and going to the farm and the family was beginning to prosper with a new house, tractor and increasing numbers of cattle stock," according to the website, *Legends of America*.

"They managed to convince their family that they had done well in the stock market, but ... they were really leading a gang of gunmen who were terrorizing the western states. Jake, the leader of the gang, led them up and down the Sacramento Valley for years, usually raiding big money crap games and high stakes gambling houses.

"Periodically they would return to Garden City when the heat was on in California."

Jake managed to accumulate quite a sizeable bank account, but Ralph reportedly didn't believe in banks. According to some accounts, he buried his money in various places in California, Nebraska, Missouri and Kansas. A cache of Ralph's booty supposedly was unearthed in Nebraska in 1952, and another in 1961 in Kansas. One cache of \$100,000 is said to be still missing, perhaps buried in the badlands of Logan and Scott Counties, or around Jake and Ralph's ranch near Garden City.

However, like a lot of yarns that pique the imagination, it may not be true. Norman T. Betz, a former Colorado newspaperman and author of *The Fleagle Gang*:

Betrayed by a Fingerprint" doubts the buried loot stories. "The brothers stuck their money in the bank like everybody else", he says.

One source says that the Fleagles were responsible for 60 percent of the bank jobs committed in the Midwest in the '20s. That seems like a lot but there's no doubt they were making a big impression on small towns such as Kinsley and Larned.

On June 30, 1927, four men robbed the National Bank in Kinsley, making off with \$12,000 and briefly, a hostage. It was a quiet afternoon with a few customers doing business at the bank when two armed men barged in through the back door, this according to a recounting of the incident in the *Kinsley Graphic* in 2001. A lookout stationed himself outside the front door while the wheelman kept the getaway car, a new Buick, ready and running.

"Hands up!" a robber shouted. When one of the tellers didn't immediately comply, he shot up a wall and the ceiling for emphasis. These blasts had the desired effect, and the robbers quickly had their bag of loot. They made the customers lie on the floor and fled with two bank employees, a man and a woman, as hostages. The woman put up a fight as they were shoving her into the car, so they left her behind and jumped into the car as it roared off. The woman ran into the bank and called the police.

The gang released the male hostage at Nettleton. Several townspeople claimed they spotted the fugitive Buick in town in the evening after the robbery, but it doesn't seem likely that seasoned criminals like the Fleagles would return and risk arrest.

The same bunch also robbed banks in Larned and Lewis. It wasn't until after the infamous robbery of the bank in Lamar, Colorado, that the Kinsley, Larned and Lewis hold-up men were identified as the Fleagle Gang.

At 1 pm on May 23, 1928, Ralph and Jake Fleagle, Royston and Abshire entered the First National Bank in Lamar, hollering at employees and customers to put their hands up. One, however, didn't. That was the bank president, A.N. Parish. Instead, he ducked into his office, pulled out "Old Betsy," his .45, and from his office door, shot Royston in the jaw. Pandemonium ensued. The bank's alarm went off, people were screaming and yelling, bullets were flying. Jake fired back at Parish, killing him. When his son, John went to his father's aid, he too was shot dead.

The gang stuffed \$10,665 in cash, \$12,400 in Liberty Bonds, and nearly \$200,000 in commercial paper (checks, promissory notes, certificates of deposit) into pillow cases and fled, taking tellers Edward A. Lundgren and Everett Kesinger hostage.

Their getaway car was a 1927 Buick Master Six, possibly the car used in the Kinsley job. The gang roared out of town, headed to Kansas with the wounded Royston moaning in pain. They made Kesinger stand on the running board as a human shield and used rifles to shoot out the radiator of the pursuing sheriff's car, disabling it. They released Lundgren, who had only one arm, but refused to let Kesinger go, heartlessly ignoring his pleas to let him return to his wife and new baby.

They arrived in Kansas by nightfall. It was evident that Royston needed medical attention, so Jake and Ralph drove to the home of Dr. W.W. Wineinger in Dighton and told him a story about a farm hand whose foot had been run over by a tractor. Wineinger grabbed his black bag. "Mind if I ride with you?" said Jake to Dr. Wineinger. "My brother will lead the way." "Suit yourself," said the doctor. In the doctor's car, Jake started to roll the window down but it was stuck. "You have to pull it towards you," the doctor said.

Exact details from various accounts about the fingerprint are unclear and sometimes contradictory, but in one account, probably the likeliest, Jake hooked his right index finger over the top of the window and pulled the window towards him while cranking it down with his left hand. Exactly how he did it, however, there is no doubt that he left one damning fingerprint on the car window.

At the brothers' hideout, the doc didn't find a farmhand with an injured foot, but the wounded Royston. "Take care of him," ordered Ralph. The hapless doctor complied. Early in the morning of May 25, Jake and Ralph drove the doctor, bound and blindfolded, to a ravine near Scott City. There, Jake shot him in the back of the head. The brothers pushed him in his car into the ravine. Before doing so, however, they carefully wiped the car clean of fingerprints. But Jake forgot about the window he had forced down, a fatal oversight.

Ralph and Jake returned to the hideout and divvied up the loot with Abshire and Royston. They stayed there for about a week, then took Kesinger to a remote spot near Liberal where Ralph shot him.

The public was outraged at the killings, but it would be 13 months before the FBI had a solid lead. When the doctor's car was pulled out of the gully, frustrated investigators found it wiped clean of prints. Then a Garden City Police detective rolled the window up and found the print of Jake's right index finger. It was photographed and copies were sent to the FBI and police departments all over the country, according to Kathleen Van Buskirk, writing in the *White River Valley (Missouri) Historical Quarterly* in 1979.

“On June 22, 1929, writes Van Buskirk, a man calling himself William Harrison Holden was picked up in Stockton, California, as a suspect in the holdup of a mail train. He had an alibi, and was released, but not before he was fingerprinted. Photos of his dabs were sent to FBI headquarters in Washington, DC, where they were identified as those of Jake Fleagle, whose prints were on file because of his robbery conviction and stint in the Oklahoma State Pen. A fingerprint expert compared Holden/Fleagle's right index fingerprint with the right index fingerprint taken from Dr. Wineinger's car. They matched. This marked the first time, crime historians say, that a single fingerprint was used to crack a case.

Detectives went to the Fleagle homestead and managed to get some information out of Jacob Fleagle, their father, and brothers Walter and Fred, especially after Walter and Fred were arrested. Ralph Fleagle was sending his kin mail from Kankakee, IL, and receiving mail at a post office box there. Agents staked out the post office and nabbed Ralph when he came in to pick up his mail. Ralph squealed on Abshire and Royston in exchange for the release of Walter and Fred, and in quick order the confederates were picked up.

Jake, however, was still at large. An ex-girlfriend named Beatrice Gramps told the law all she knew about Jake, although she knew him as William Harrison Holden. She provided enough info to share in the reward money.

Ralph Fleagle, Abshire and Royston were convicted of murder and died on the gallows of the Colorado State Penitentiary in Canon City on various dates in July, 1930. It was before they were executed, incidentally, that the gang members confessed to the bank stickups in Edwards and Pawnee Counties.

In October of that year the law caught up with Jake. He was living in a house in the woods near the hamlet of Ridgedale, Missouri, with a man named Lee Cook, and was claiming to be Walter Cook, Lee's brother. Lawmen, acting on tips that he was living somewhere along the Missouri-Arkansas border, were already starting to close in.

Jake was tripped up by his distinctive handwriting”, according to Van Buskirk. “Letters he had mailed home to Garden City revealed an unusual capital “D.” Circulars containing samples of his handwriting were distributed to postal workers all along the border. Finally one P.O. employee spotted the distinctive D on an envelope addressed to a man in California.

In his letter, Jake told his old buddy that he wanted to meet up with him, and asked him to place a personal ad in the Wichita Eagle. This man, pressured by

the law, placed the ad. Jake sent him a letter asking him to meet him in Yellville, Arkansas., on Oct 14”, according to Van Buskirk's account.

“Jake boarded the train in Branson. He had no sooner taken his seat than several lawmen materialized, guns drawn. Jake reached for his gun, but one of the officers fired, striking him in the abdomen. He died the next day. In his final hour, writes Van Buskirk, he called out for his mother.”

Jake and Ralph are buried in Valley View Cemetery in Garden City.

Read more at

[The Legend - Life in SouthWest Kansas](#)

[Outlaw for My Neighbor from White River Valley Historical Quarterly](#)

[Jake and Ralph Fleagle](#)

The copy of "THE FATE OF THE FLEAGLE GANG" that we have in our collection is from the Austin and Alta Fife American Collection: FOLK COLL 4, no. 2, Vol. 31 (Extracts from the Stella M. Hendren Collection), item 624. The items in the Hendren Collection come from (as the Fife's write in the collection preface) "the extensive but unorganized collection of songs gathered largely since 1940 by Mrs. Stella M. Hendren of Kooskia, Idaho. Mrs. Hendren loaned us [Fife's] two suitcases filled with handwritten or typed copies of songs and song text clipped from farm journals and other periodicals."

For your reference, below is Item 624, in ink on lined paper.

The Fate of the Fleagle Gang

Now listen my friends and I'll tell you
A story of bandits so bold
Way out in Lamar, Colorado
They robbed the town's bank of its gold.

Two innocent bankers were murdered
And another one carried from town
In a cabin way up in the mountains
The poor fellows body was found.

Then one of the bandits was wounded
And begged for relief from his pain
They went for a doctor to aid him
And later the doctor was slain.

As last in an Illinois city
One of the bandits was found
Ralph Fleagle then made his confession
For the law had at last run him down.

His body will soon lie in slumber
Out there 'neath the clear western skies
For robbery and cold blooded murder
Ralph Fleagle now goes forth to die.

He walks without fear to the scaffold
The black cap is placed on his head
The sheriff steps on the trigger
Ralph Fleagle the bandit is dead.

But Ralph's brother Jake was not captured
For two years he wandered at will
And then down at Bronson, Missouri
He came to the end of the trail.

It was there on the old station platform
Where Jake Fleagle made his last stand
But one fatal shot from the sherrif
The law had at last got their man.

Oh! Why are these young men so foolish
To think they can murder at will
When there is that mighty commandment
That teaches us "Thou shalt not kill."

Now listen young men let me tell you
Take warning before its too late
You'll find on that great Judgment Morning
You can't stack your cards against fate."

Tune: same s "Death of Floyd Collins"; Randy Williams, Folklore Curator
Special Collections & Archives, Utah State University